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ABSTRACT

This paper explores two ways in which myth operates in and informs the structure of "Absalom, Absalom!": (1) the suggestion of mythic import created by direct parallels with a Biblical myth, and (2) the creation of a modern myth through the accumulation of oral histories, oral interpretations, and oral revisions of the major story--that of the Sutpen family. The paper concludes that the pervading conception of myth in the book seems to be related on many levels, past and present, to an idea of the perfect social order and the preservation of that order. The preservation of the myth draws its substance from the retelling, reinterpretation, and recreation of it by new generations. (LL)

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The Performance of Southern Myth in Absalom, Absalom! by William Faulkner

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There are many ways of perceiving and defining the word "myth." It is often associated with some kind of story in which there is a narrative line (e.g., Greek and Biblical myths). It is sometimes seen as the truth symbolically portrayed. It is sometimes seen as fiction without historical base. It is sometimes seen as the false perception, exaggeration, or idealization of events. It is perhaps wish-fulfillment, the making of what we desire to be. This paper will not attempt to define myth,[1] nor even to explore fully that peculiar manifestation of "Southern myth"[2] found in the novels of William Faulkner. Rather, it will explore two ways in which myth operates in and informs the structure of Absalom, Absalom!: (1) the suggestion of mythic import created by direct parallels with a Biblical myth, and (2) the creation of a modern myth through the accumulation of oral histories, oral interpretations, and oral revisions of the major story--that of the Sutpen family.

The first operational evidence of myth in Absalom, Absalom! can, of course, be seen in the title and its reference to the Biblical story of King David and his son. In the Biblical account, Absalom kills his half-brother because of an incestuous relationship the brother has had with Absalom's sister, Tamar. Absalom runs away, is later forgiven by David, and returns to live with his father. Delusions of power cause him to re-

volt against David and he is killed by David's generals. It is at this time that David mourns his son with the refrain, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 19:4). In Faulkner's novel, a parallel is suggested between Henry Sutpen and Absalom. Henry, the son of an empire builder, kills his half-brother Charles Bon, who is contemplating an incestuous relationship with Henry's (and therefore Charles') sister Judith. Another parallel might be seen between Thomas Sutpen and King David, since each is deprived of a son whom he loves or at least whom he wishes to carry on the royal line. And as Absalom revolts against his father, so Henry for a time revolts against Sutpen. The instances of parallels between the two stories are numerous in the novel. The examples cited illustrate the reminders of an earlier myth which, appearing continuously, invest the novel with an underlying structural and thematic device on which Faulkner plays many variations.

While the Biblical story of Absalom provides a frame for the suggestion of a modern parallel in Absalom, Absalom!, there is also a sense in which the shifting and constantly changing narrative perspective functions in shaping a modern myth, peculiar to the South. The novel contains a number of speakers who assume major narrative responsibility and who have a centrality of focus--relating and interpreting the story of Thomas Sutpen and his family (or families). Early in the novel, Miss Rosa Coldfield tells what she knows of the story to Quentin Compson the summer before he enters Harvard. Quentin learns more of the story from his father, who presumably learned it from his grandfather, who was told part of it by Sutpen himself. Another part of the narrative is supplied by a letter, written to Judith Sutpen by Charles Bon and given by her to Quentin's grandmother. Later, Quentin is told some of the "facts" of the story by

Henry Sutpen, although we hear only Quentin's recreation of the scene that transpired between them. There is also another narrator who is present in the novel and who is omniscient with respect to Quentin. Although this narrator is also omniscient with respect to Miss Rosa, Quentin's father, and Shreve, he seems primarily interested in Quentin, since he appears only in scenes where Quentin is present. He also seems to be no closer to the "facts" than any of the other narrators, and he spends most of his speaking time not in reconstructing the events but in describing Quentin hearing those events. Even in his reconstruction of events, this narrator offers no concrete evidence to validate his facts. When Quentin and Shreve set out to reconstruct the story (from the perspective of their room at Harvard, months after Quentin has heard all the versions of the story), they work entirely from second-hand information, with the exception of the letter from Bon and the information of Miss Rosa, who actually witnessed some events in the story. Miss Rosa, however, poses the problem of all first-person major participants in the action--which is certainly the way Miss Rosa perceives herself--and that problem is credibility. Miss Rosa does not restrict herself to the recitation of facts but continually deals with the assumed or assigned motivations of the characters, as do all the speakers. The implication of this briefly sketched discussion of point of view and its relationship to myth is that the myth does not lie in the story of Sutpen and his family alone but also in the recreation of it by each major speaker--Miss Rosa, Quentin's father, Quentin, Shreve, and the major narrator who ties the speakers together and who seems to be particularly concerned with Quentin's reaction to the story.

If the major narrator's job is that of tying the separate narrations together, then the focus of the novel becomes the various characters'

recreations and interpretations of the story. Presumably the "real" facts of the Sutpen story are supplied by the author at the end of the novel in the Chronology, Genealogy, and the map. The myth apparently lies not in the facts but in the interpretations of the facts by the various characters. The reader becomes very aware of this because the job of keeping point of view straight becomes impossible unless one is an accountant. The characters not only sound alike, their interest is the same. They want to find out what happened; and in doing so they create what happens. They begin to speak with the voice of the South to create the myth of the South, in which at least Miss Rosa and Quentin are still participating. Shreve, in his attempt to understand the South, speaks with Quentin as one mind, one voice; neither is aware of just who is doing the talking:

> They stared--glared--at one another. It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking becomes audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too, quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporizing breath.3

Shreve and Quentin not only speak as one voice but become the characters in the drama, making the myth not only past but present. They not only recreate it but act it out at times. Dialogue is created and sometimes they take roles, as can be seen in the following:

> Not two of them in a New England college sitting-room but one in a Mississippi library sixty years ago, with holly and mistletoe in vases on the mantel or thrust behind, crowning and garlanding with the season and time the pictures on the walls, and a sprig or so decorating the photograph, the group--mother and two children--on the desk,

> behind which the father sat when the son entered. . . . (p. 294)

. . .

> Quentin and Shreve stared at one another--glared rather--their quiet regular breathing vaporizing faintly and steadily in the now tomblike air. There was something curious in the way they looked at one another, curious and quiet and profoundly intent, not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself--a sort of hushed and naked searching, each look burdened with youth's immemorial obsession not with time's dragging weight which the old live with but with its fluidity: the bright heels of all the lost moments of fifteen and sixteen. (p. 299)

This illusory reality of the people of the Sutpen story (Quentin and Shreve treat them as dramatis personae in their reenactment) is reinforced by numerous allusions to "ghosts," "shades," "spectres," and "shadows" throughout the novel. Shreve is viewed by the major narrator as seeing the characters in the story as ghosts. Quentin sees himself and Miss Rosa as ghosts in her "office." If they are ghosts, they are haunted by the spectres of the story of Sutpen. Quentin thinks,

> Am I going to have to have to bear it all again he thought I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever so apparently not only a man never outlives his father but not even his friends and acquaintances do--. . . . (p. 277)

Henry is referred to as Hamlet who was haunted by the ghost of his father,

> . . . that door, that gaunt tragic dramatic self-hypnotized youth-ful face like the tragedian in a college play, an academic Hamlet waked from some trancement of the curtain's falling and blundering across the dusty stage from which the rest of the cast had departed last Commencement. . . . (p. 174)

Bon is spoken of by Quentin's father as a myth, a phantom who haunts the Sutpens and is also created by them: "Yes, shadowy: a myth, a phantom: something which they engendered and created whole themselves; some efflu-

vium of Sutpen blood and character, as though as a man he did not exist at all" (p. 104).

Concurrent with the possibility of there not being any story at all except in the retelling and interpreting of it (e.g., to Shreve the characters are "shades," Miss Rosa never actually sees Bon's body, and almost all the information is second hand), time and myth operate not chronologically but cyclically. The metaphor of "ghosts" liberates the myth from historical fixity--ghosts do not die but return to haunt the living. Quentin perceives the story as continuously happening,

> Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm thinking Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (pp. 261-262)

If it takes Sutpen to make them all--the inheritors of the South who make the myth, and the inheritors who perpetuate that myth by retelling it--then perhaps those sons, those inheritors, are doomed as was the son of David.

Does the South create, or has the South created, a myth which will inevitably destroy it? Does the "perfect" social order created by Sutpen and men like him and inherited by Quentin and Miss Rosa, carry within it the seeds of its own destruction because the men who created it were not perfect? Henry kills Bon not because of incest but because of the threat of miscegenation; Sutpen is killed by Wash because of Sutpen's total

dedication to the ideal he has created--sons to carry on the perfect order. The South, grown proud like Absalom, revolts against its father, the Union, and is killed in the process, but refuses to die. Or does the South only come into being because of the recreation and reenactment of the myth of the perfect social order by its sons? Quentin, one of its sons, says he wishes he had been there; but he reconsiders: "No. If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain" (p. 190).

Absalom, Absalom! ends with Quentin's insisting that he does not hate the South. Quentin is only too aware that the myth is not just the truth, it is not just a story, it is not just fiction without historical basis, it is not just idealization or wish-fulfillment. The simple fact of the myth's existence and its perpetuation in himself are far more important to him than the separate, individual elements that inform and constitute the myth.

There are obvious comparisons that can be made between Henry in Absalom, Absalom! and Quentin in The Sound and the Fury. Although the latter was published before Absalom, Absalom!, the time of the story of Absalom, Absalom! occurs before that of The Sound and the Fury. In Absalom, Absalom! the story of the myth involves Henry's killing Bon to prevent a miscegenous and incestuous relationship with Judith. Quentin also feels some kind of incestuous longing, if not for his sister Caddy herself, at least for the idea of Caddy as a representative of Southern womanhood and therefore a part of the "perfect" social order of the South.[4] If Quentin's perceptions are the main focus of the major narrator in Absalom, Absalom!, as I have suggested, then he would seem to be the main character in the novel and his point of view would be the culminating one in terms of the meaning and interpretation of the story of the Sutpens. This creating and

interpreting of the story is also the major source of the myth in the novel, as I have said. If the myth is reenacted in the modern South, then Quentin represents Henry in the sense that he resents the impurification of the body of his sister by an unworthy,[5] and he also represents Bon since he feels incestuous longing for Caddy. But unlike Henry, Bon, and Judith, Quentin must act out the myth by himself; and if the resolution is death, then Quentin has no one to kill but himself. Thus Absalom, Absalom! ends with Quentin's self-hate and The Sound and the Fury with his self-destruction.

In summation, the pervading conception of myth in Absalom, Absalom! seems to be related on many levels, past and present, to an idea of the perfect social order and the preservation of that order. The preservation of the myth draws its substance from the re-telling, re-interpretation, and recreation of it by new generations. Such considerations as these suggest many possibilities for the interpreter to explore, for he, too, is engaged in oral interpretation(s) of that myth.

FOOTNOTES

[1]For a full and diverse discussion of myth see the collection of essays in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., Myth: A Symposium (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1970).

[2]Two books which offer some insight into the "Southern myth" are Lillian Smith, Killers of the Dream (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1949), and W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1941).

[3]William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Random House, Inc., 1951), p. 262. All further references to this edition of the novel will cited in the body of the text.

[4]For an insightful and frank discussion of the symbolic role the white Southern woman came to play in the social order of the South, see "Three Ghost Stories," pp. 109-133, in Lillian Smith's The Killers of the Dream.

[5]A character sketch of Quentin, including a description of his feelings for Caddy, appears in William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: Random House, Inc., 1946), pp. 4-21.